

Teaching resilience

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In 2016, Tasmania experienced both bushfire and flood. According to the Tasmanian State Natural Disaster Risk Assessment, Tasmania is also not immune to severe storms, earthquakes and landslides.

To help prepare the next generation for these natural disasters, the University of Tasmania offers an undergraduate unit called 'Resilience in the face of emergencies'. It is a 'breadth' unit; a semester-long course of study that is open to students from all faculties. It provides students with the skills and understanding that allows them to make a difference in their own lives, and the lives of others.

Dr Benjamin Brooks is Unit Coordinator and is joined in teaching it by Dr Christine Owen and Dr Deb Carnes. The course is informed by a project led by Dr Brooks through the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC that is looking at decision-making during emergencies (for more information on this project see page 38). This unit, he explained, is critical for students to understand 'wicked' problems—problems where the issues are resistant to being resolved and where attempted solutions can affect the things that people depend on.

'The wicked problem we are dealing with now is how we improve resilience in the modern world when the number and scale of emergencies are increasing and acting to erode resilience. We want to improve it, but everything that is happening is eroding it,' he said.

To understand resilience, students explore the concept from a range of perspectives including psychological and physiological, and at different levels, including personal, community, organisational, governmental and global.

'Often people take a very narrow perspective of resilience, being simply the ability to bounce back. In fact resilience includes other aspects such as the work we do in order to be more resilient, even before an event occurs,' Dr Brooks said.

'There are about a million books written by people where they've found themselves in an emergency and what they did in order to get out of that. Unpacking those accounts in terms of what the key aspects of psychology and physiology are that determines why this person actually made it through is really critical,' he said.

Students are asked to be creative in imagining a disaster scenario, undertaking a personal audit of their resilience based on that scenario, and extrapolating the issues they discover to a community context. On a practical level, students are asked to identify three things that would improve the resilience of their household.

The concept is taken further with students having to think critically about how their personal resilience factors might have effects at state or national levels.

'If they decided that one of the things their household needed was an independent water supply for three days, then we challenge them to think about what the implications are for everyone in the state or in Australia if that was scaled up. What impact does that have at a government level, how does that change the ways these levels of community and organisations should manage resilience and response?' he said.

Many of the students have been affected by natural disaster, but the unit encourages them to think outside the usual emergency scenarios.

'There could be anything from getting lost in the bush to some sort of medical emergency. Essentially we're trying to teach people about resilience because it's not just theoretical, it has a very practical application,' Dr Brooks said. While the unit focuses on emergencies, Dr Brooks was surprised to hear feedback from students that the unit had built their personal resilience in many other areas.

'We had students talking about how their parents had recently split up and they were going to take some of the concepts they've learnt in the course and apply it to that situation. We didn't realise the scope of what we were dealing with until students started pointing out that they could use the learnings from the course to deal with all sorts of personal, emotional or social issues,' Dr Brooks said.

While the course has been running since January 2016, Dr Brooks said the next step is to turn the unit into a massive open online course for others in the community.

'We think there are lots of people in the community who could benefit from a profound understanding of resilience. The next stage is to think about how to design that course, and make it a bit more interactive online to account for the fact that you don't have people standing in front of you,' he said.

'I wish these courses were available when I was a student. We spend a lot of time learning specific areas of expertise, and while university education and assessments are becoming more contextualised and more authentic, units like this are doing what I hoped for university students. It demonstrates the complexities of being in the real world and gets them to think through what that means,' he said.